Article: Learning to Fly in the Outback

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Despite a steep learning curve and some harrowing instructional moments, Tom Clynes conquers a Cessna and is cleared for takeoff into the big
wide open.

By Tom Clynes

The second time I saw Fred Hughes, his image passed quickly through the corner of my left eye, a speed-blurred figure of a cowboy leaning against a tailgate, shooing a fly from his face. Hughes's truck was parked next to his airstrip, a red-dirt affair that was, at the moment, rising toward me much too quickly.

I hauled back on the Cessna's control column, but the airplane hit the dirt with all three wheels and bounced skyward, pitching forward and yawing to the left "a bit sickeningly," as Hughes would later

put it. As the craft settled again toward the ground, I got the nose up and pointed to the end of the runway and eased the plane down on the rear wheels.

"No offense, mate," Hughes said, "but I'm glad it's not my plane you're learning in."

Fred Hughes's Kars Station was my first overnight stop on a 1,700-mile (2,736-kilometer) learn-to-fly journey around Australia's eastern outback. Traveling with me, in the copilot's seat, was instructor Pablo Mueller, 23, a fresh-faced German with the patience of a stone Buddha and the reflexes of a mongoose. I had spent the past week with Mueller, learning the basics of flying at ***Moorabbin Airport***, *outside* of Melbourne. After seven days of intensive theory and twice-daily flights, we had packed our gear into a Cessna 182—an ideal aircraft to access remote outback airstrips, with its long range and short takeoff and landing capability—and flown north into the clouds. The coastal overcast gave way to scattered puffs as we crossed the wine and grain country of the Murray Basin. Then the green fields below us faded to mauve and sage and bare red earth, and the sky spread around us in a deep and seamless blue.

In the rear seat was Australian Peter Sherlock, also a pilot and co-owner of a Melbourne-based company called Big Blue Air Touring. Sherlock specializes in airborne tours of the outback's roadhouses and remote ranches, which Aussies call stations. At my request he had put together an itinerary that would combine flight instruction with visits to his far-flung friends in four Australian states: Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia.

On the way up from Moorabbin we had stopped for fuel at Broken Hill, the mining town that served as a base for filming Road Warrior and The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. Then, after checking in with Hughes, we had gone up to practice a few touch-and-go landings in the last strands of orange sunlight. Each takeoff generated dense cyclones of red dust, which the light breeze carried toward Hughes's house.

Sherlock said, as Mueller and I hammered in the stakes to which we would tie down the airplane.

"Next time I'm coming out with brooms," Hughes said, "so you can sweep all the topsoil out of the house. How many landings did you do, anyway?"

"Six," Sherlock said, "if you double-count the last one, when Tom managed two in one go."

Sherlock, 36, has an up-for-anything attitude and a boyish grin that anchors a lofty, clean-shaven crown. In 2003, after getting his private pilot's license, he spent three weeks flying around Australia in a Cessna 182, making friends as he went, with people like Fred Hughes.

"Somewhere along the way," he told me, "it occurred to me that this would be one hell of a fun way to make a living."

Hughes, 33, is low-key and solidly lean. And, sheep jokes notwithstanding, he is apparently considered one of the most eligible bachelors in the eastern outback. He's the fifth generation in a line of graziers who settled in western New South Wales and built something of an empire of sheep and cattle stations, including the 150,000-acre (60,703-hectare) Kars Station. Later we would fly over another Hughes family station that is, at four and a half million acres (18,210 square kilometers), larger than the state of Connecticut.

In the Australian outback, ranching is done on a mind-boggling scale. Apart from pumping water from deep bore wells, there's very little human intervention in a sheep's life. The animals roam freely, finding their own feed, giving birth unassisted, and encountering humans only when something disagreeable is in store for them. Country this arid can support only about one sheep per 15 acres (6 hectares) in a good season, but more than three years of drought have left the land particularly bare and fragile.

"In the good years," Hughes said, "you make a lot of money. Then you weather the bad ones, if you manage it right."

Now we sat at a table under a sprawling eucalyptus tree that I had repeatedly dodged on my final approaches. As the sky flared into spectacular hues of pink and purple, Hughes threw some lamb chops on the barbie and plucked a few bottles of hearty red wine from the kitchen. His dog Boofa, a red kelpie, amused himself by chasing giant moths around the garden.

Recently, Hughes earned his own private pilot's license and keeps his Cessna 172 in a shed along with the motorcycles that he uses to muster the sheep. Every day or two, he flies a circuit around the property, checking water levels in the stock tanks. If he needs to retrieve supplies or pick up a date in Broken Hill, he's only a few minutes away; he can reach Adelaide in a little more than two hours.

We stayed up late under the nearly full moon, talking about flying, ranching, and traveling. The next morning, after breakfast and goodbyes, I flew north with Mueller and Sherlock, paralleling the world's longest fence. Originally built to keep rabbits out of South Australia, the 3,488-mile (5,613-kilometer) barrier is now maintained to prevent dingoes from entering sheep-grazing areas.

Whisking over the desert at 140 knots, it was easy to see just how marginal and uncompromising this land is—and how unfathomably vast. The dunes below rippled in the angled sunlight, appearing as waves in a vast inland sea (in fact, this was a seabed 110 million years ago). Among the splashes of orange and beige were islands of rock and occasional human input: a road, a stock tank, an abandoned oil well, or a cattle station.

On my flight from Los Angeles to Melbourne, I had traveled at 41,000 feet (12,497 meters) in a Boeing 747, an aircraft designed, in the service of safety and comfort, to insulate passengers from the experience of flying. Whenever I lifted the window shade, the surface below was abstract and inaccessible; we were simply too high to see much of anything.

Now, at 5,000 feet (1,524 meters), I was surrounded by glass and radiant light, looking not sideways but ahead, in the direction of travel. My view of the landscape below was intimate and privileged, and I could feel the airplane all around me, vulnerable to pockets of rising or falling air, responsive to my every command. Ahead of me, the Earth's horizon curved like a vast lens, magnifying the sense of unhindered possibility.

Learning to fly may be every boy's (and many girls') dream, but time and money are the most common wake-up calls. Most American private pilots earn their licenses on weekends at suburban airfields, spending around $5,000 over a period of several months. For a little less than twice that amount, I would get two-thirds of the flight time required for an American private pilot's license, while exploring one of the most extraordinary wildernesses on Earth. Although currency fluctuations and surges in fuel prices have lifted Australia out of the bargain bin, it is still among the world's best places to learn to fly. The instructors are first-rate, the weather is dependable, and, outside the cities, the skies are essentially empty.

But every boy's dream turned out to be a lot of hard yakka, as the Aussies say. During those first seven days with Mueller at General Flying Services, which trains cadets from Qantas Airways and several Asian airlines, I found myself flexing mathematical muscles that I hadn't used in decades. Eventually, I came to comprehend things like L=CL x r x 1/2V2 x A (the formula for lift), but every time I climbed into the cockpit, my IQ seemed to drop 30 points.

Flying a plane is the ultimate multitasking scenario. While controlling roll, pitch, and yaw, you must watch out for other aircraft and maintain contact with the tower. You are dealing simultaneously with wind and relative airspeed, with angle of attack, with the forces of power and load, weight and lift, thrust and drag. For most people, it is a new, and vastly accelerated, way of thinking. And unlike with ground transportation, you can't just pull over to figure things out.

As I bungled through the skies in my earlier orientation south of Melbourne, Mueller had calmly corrected me: "Keep the nose up . . . Compensate with the right rudder . . . Watch your rate of climb . . . Fifteen degrees on that turn . . . Mind the horizon now."

By the fifth day, we were working on get-out-of-trouble maneuvers, such as recovering from spins and stalls, and emergency landings. The swirling horizons and stomach-floating plummets left me woozy for days, but I found the techniques relatively easy to master.

Of course, there's no great utility in being able to recover from spins and stalls if you can't land the plane. Time and again, I had botched the final moments before touchdown, prompting Mueller to grab the controls and smoothly rein things in.

"Landing is the most challenging part of flying," said Mueller. "It's an art that can't be fully explained. You just have to do it again and again until you get it."

On the other hand, I noticed that the Qantas cadets, all in their early 20s, seemed to be getting the hang of it more quickly. I expressed my frustration to Ross Carrington, 49, who owns the flight school.
"In your 20s," said Carrington, "your hand-eye coordination and sense of balance are at their peak. But you're actually making great progress for an older bloke."
I'm 44.
On the sixth day of training, I had gone out to do a preflight inspection of a Cessna 172R trainer with the call letters EUC—Echo Uniform Charlie, in airmen's lingo. Across the tarmac, a Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia airplane rolled in, and the crew unloaded a gurney into a waiting ambulance. The ambulance eased away slowly, lights off, and word spread around the airport that a Cessna 150 had crashed on the other side of Port Phillip Bay. The pilot, a 45-year-old member of the Royal Victorian Aero Club, did not survive his injuries.
Alex Kepper, a 35-year-old Aussie who was filling in for Mueller on his day off, walked up as I was checking the oil.
"G'day, Tom," he said. "You'll be doing your first solo today."
"I'm not ready," I told him, replacing the dipstick. "I'm definitely not ready."
Kepper said nothing and climbed into the copilot's seat. We flew three awkward circuits of takeoffs and landings together. Then Kepper asked me to park on a patch of tarmac near the wind sock. He pressed the radio's transmit button.
"Echo Uniform Charlie, advising tower that pilot will fly first solo circuit."
"I don't think I'm ready," I said.
"You're ready."
"Uh, I don't think so."
Kepper climbed out of the copilot's seat, closed the door, and flashed me a nippy thumbs-up. A few minutes later, with sweat streaming from every pore, I found myself pushing the throttle forward and barreling down the runway, into a squall of my own fears.
At 55 knots I lifted the nose above the horizon. At 500 feet (152 meters) I banked right. I leveled off at a thousand feet and turned downwind, announcing my position. I blasted through my checklists and got in line for the base leg, throttling back, extending flaps, trimming and turning onto final approach. Angles and speeds looked good as I floated toward the runway threshold, cleared for landing. As I made minor adjustments, it suddenly struck me how easy it all seemed. Alone in the cockpit I was in a groove, confident and reveling in the sensation of guiding my own plane through the air. The controls had become extensions of my reflexes; the many small memorized numbers were adding up, suddenly, to something like a big picture.
Passing the runway's numerals I leveled off, cut the throttle, and settled the machine down for my best landing thus far. As I coasted off the runway, I heard the controller's voice in my headphones.
"Echo Uniform Charlie," he said, "congratulations on your first solo!"
All information in this article was accurate when first published in November 2005. Please confirm any details before making travel plans.
Article: Five Steps to Flight
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By Sam Carmichael

Step 1: Go to the Doctor

All prospective private pilots must be at least 17 and undergo a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) medical exam, which tests sight—20/40 (corrected) or higher is required—and hearing, and looks at medical history. Check www.faa.gov for a list of FAA-certified doctors.

Step 2: Find an Instructor

For the adventure-plus-flight-training combo, see "Schools With Great Views." For traditional schools, visit the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's Web site (flighttraining.aopa.org). But before you settle on an instructor, test-drive a few during two-hour intro flights ($50). One tip: Beware anyone who calls you "Iceman."

Step 3: Train, Train, Train
After landing an instructor, you must log at least 40 hours of total flight time—including 20 hours with your teacher and ten solo hours—augmented by intensive classroom sessions on FAA regulations, aerodynamics, weather assessment, and navigation. Full-time students can finish in three weeks; part-timers can take six months or more.
Step 4: Pass the Tests
Pilots must pass a 60-question knowledge test (www.faa.gov/pilots/become) and a practical test with an FAA examiner other than your instructor. The latter is like a driver's license exam, minus parallel parking.
Step 5: Get Airborne
You've aced the tests, gotten your license, and arranged a plane rental with your local airport (which typically runs $100 to $200 an hour). Up, up, and away, Maverick!
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Article: Flight Schools With Great Views
Republished from *National Geographic Adventure* Magazine
By Sam Carmichael
The Outback, Australia
Make like the author and tour the outback with Peter Sherlock's **Big Blue Air Touring**. After three weeks of instruction at Melbourne's Moorabbin Airport ($12,000, including instruction; $3,635 for the four-day bush tour only; www.bigblueairtouring.com), you'll follow the author's route north, acquiring bush-flying techniques while station-jumping across interior Australia.
Talkeetna, Alaska
While the earthbound labor up Mount McKinley, you circle the summit in a tailwheel Aeronca Champion 7HC. **Above Alaska Aviation, LLC**, offers training for beginners and ski-plane and bush pilot courses for certified pilots ($5,000 for the three-week training course; www.abovealaska.com).
Boca Raton, Florida
With the **Sky Blue Aviation Academy** Private Pilot Accelerated Certification course ($8,500 for 55 hours of instruction; www.flyskyblue.com), you'll learn to fly while island-hopping the Florida Keys. Says instructor Jeremie Baughan: "Once you're out over that beautiful blue-and-green water, nothing else matters."
Pretoria, South Africa
Master the helicopter while you assist in game counts, help tranquilize and transport lions, and overnight in comfy bush camps. **Learn to Fly** instructor John Bassi offers a six-week, all-inclusive airborne safari ($19,950; www.helicopter-training.org) that departs from Pretoria and tours the animal-packed Transvaal.
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